WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1   1. A method of providing a remote networked computer with a

2   service session using one of a plurality of similarly

3   functioning software applications residing on different

4   servers with different unique network addresses, the method

5   comprising:

6   receiving, from the remote computer and at a device

7   having a unique network address that is different from the

8   network address of any of the servers, a packet-based message

9   comprising a request for a service session;

10   assigning one of the several servers to be used by the

11 remote computer in the service session; and

12   transmitting, to the remote computer, a packet-based

13 message comprising the unique network address of the assigned

14 server for the remote user to address subsequent messages

15 during the service session.

1   2. The method of claim 1 further comprising receiving, at the

2   assigned server, subsequent packet-based messages from the

3   remote computer as part of the service session, the

4   subsequent messages each being addressed to the unique

5   network address of the assigned server.

1   3. The method of claim 2 further comprising, receiving, at the

2   assigned server, periodic packet-based test messages from

3   the remote computer, and in response, transmitting a

4   packet-based message back to the remote computer to

5   indicate an operable connection.

1   4. The method of claim 1, wherein the device that receives the

2   message comprising a request for a service session is a

3   load balancer.

1   5. The method of claim 1, wherein the software applications

2   involve interaction between multiple remote computers.

1   6. The method of claim 5, wherein the software applications

2   provide Internet telephony service.

1   7. The method of claim 5, wherein the software applications

2   are multiple-user gaming applications.

1   8. The method of claim 5, wherein the software applications

2   are music-sharing applications.

1   9. The method of claim 5, wherein the software applications

2   are peer-to-peer applications.

1 10.   The method of claim 4, wherein the message comprising

2   a request for a service session includes a network address

3   header containing the unique network address of the load

4   balancer, a data port address header, and data fields

5   associated with the software application.

1 11.   The method of claim 10, wherein the data fields

2   associated with the software application includes a length

3   field, a type field, and a field containing the network

4   address of the remote computer that requested the service

5   session.

1 12.   The method of claim 1, wherein the message transmitted

2   to the remote computer comprising the unique network

3   address of the assigned server includes a network address

4   header containing a unique network address associated with

5   the remote computer that requested the service session, a

6   data port address header, and data fields associated with

7   the software application.

1 13.   The method of claim 12, wherein the data fields

2   associated with the software applications includes a length

3   field, a type field, and a field containing the network

4   address of the assigned server.

1   14.   The method of claim 1, wherein the unique network

2   addresses are all unique IP addresses.

1   15.   The method of claim 1, wherein the packet-based

2   message comprising the unique network address of the

3   assigned server is transmitted by the assigned server.

1   16.   The method of claim 1, wherein the packet-based

2   message comprising the unique network address of the

3   assigned server is transmitted by a load balancer.

1   17.   An apparatus for providing service sessions to remote

2   networked computers, comprising:

3   a plurality of servers each having a different unique

4   network address, each of the servers for executing a similarly

5   functioning software application to provide a service session;

6   a load balancer having a unique network address different

7   from the unique network address of any of the servers, the

8   load balancer comprising a first processor and first memory

9   for storing thereon instructions that when executed by the

10   first processor assigns, in response to receiving from a

11   remote networked computer a packet-based message comprising a

12   request for a service session, one of the servers to be used

13   by the remote computer in the service session;

14   a second processor and second memory for storing thereon

15   instructions that when executed by the second processor

16   transmits, to the remote networked computer that requested

17   service, a packet-based message containing the identity of the

18   unique network address of the assigned server to which the

19   remote networked computer is to address packet-based messages

20   during the service session.

1   18.   The apparatus of claim 17, wherein the first and

2   second processors are the same, and the first and second

3   memory are the same, the second processor and second memory

4   thus being part of the load balancer.

1   19.   The apparatus of claim 17, wherein the second

2   processor and the second memory are part of the assigned

3   server.

1   20.   The apparatus of claim 17, wherein the software

2   applications involve interaction between multiple remote

3   users.

1   21.   The apparatus of claim 20, wherein the software

2   applications are Internet telephony applications.

1   22.   The apparatus of claim 20, wherein the software

2   applications are multiple user gaming applications.

1   23.   The method of claim 20, wherein the software

2   applications are music-sharing applications.

1   24.   The method of claim 20, wherein the software

2   applications are peer-to-peer applications.

1   25.   The apparatus of claim 17, wherein the message

2   comprising a request for a service session includes a

3   network address header containing the unique network

4   address of the load balancer, a data port address header,

5   and data fields associated with the software application.

1   26.   The apparatus of claim 25, wherein the data fields

2   associated with the software application includes a length

3   field, a type field, and a field containing the network

4   address of the remote computer that requested the service

5   session.

1   27.   The apparatus of claim 17, wherein the message

2   transmitted to the remote computer comprising the unique

3   network address of the assigned server includes a network

4   address header containing a unique network address

5   associated with the remote computer that requested the

6   service session, a data port address header, and data

7   fields associated with the software application.

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1   28.   The apparatus of claim 27, wherein the data fields

2   associated with the software applications includes a length

3   field, a type field, and a field containing the network

4   address of the assigned server.

1   29.   The apparatus of claim 17, wherein the unique network

2   addresses are all unique IP addresses.

1   30.   An apparatus that assigns, for a service session, one

2   of a plurality of servers with unique network addresses,

3   each of the plurality of servers being capable of executing

4   a similarly functioning software application to provide the

5   service session, the apparatus comprising:

6   a unique network address that is different from the

7   unique network address of any of the plurality of servers;

8   a processor; and

9   memory for storing thereon instructions that when

10 executed by the processor perform the following functions:

11   assigns one of the servers to be used by a remote

12   computer in the service session in response to receiving

13   a packet-based message comprising a request for the

14   service session from the remote computer; and

15   transmits, to the remote computer that requested the

16   service session, a packet-based message containing the

24

17   unique network address of the assigned server to which

18   the remote computer is to address packet-based messages

19   during the service session.

1   31.   The apparatus of claim 30, wherein the message

2   comprising a request for a service session includes a

3   network address header that contains the unique network

4   address of the apparatus, a data port address header, and

5   data fields associated with the software application.

1   32.   The apparatus of claim 31, wherein the data fields

2   associated with the software application includes a length

3   field, a type field, and a field containing the network

4   address of the remote computer that requested the service

5   session.

1   33.   The apparatus of claim 30, wherein the message

2   transmitted to the remote computer comprising the unique

3   network address of the assigned server includes a network

4   address header containing a unique network address

5   associated with the remote computer that requested the

6   service session, a data port address header, and data

7   fields associated with the software application.

1   34.   The apparatus of claim 33, wherein the data fields

2   associated with the software applications includes a length

3   field, a type field, and a field containing the network

4   address of the assigned server.

1   35.   Computer readable medium having stored thereon program

2   instructions that when executed by a processor in a

3   networked computer perform the following functions:

4   transmits, in response to a predetermined user command

5   input to the networked computer, a packet-based message

6   comprising a request for a service session to a remote service

7   provider, the message being addressed to a unique network

8   address associated with the service provider, the service

9   provider comprising a plurality of different servers with

10   different unique network addresses, each of the servers having

11   thereon similarly functioning software applications to provide

12   a service session;

13   in response to receiving from the service provider a

14   packet-based message comprising a unique network address for

15   one of the plurality of servers that has been assigned for the

16   service session, transmits during the service session packet-

17   based messages addressed to the unique network address of the

18   assigned server.

1   36.   The computer readable medium of claim 35, wherein the

2   service session involves interaction between multiple

3   networked computers remote from the service provider.

1   37.   The computer readable medium of claim 36, wherein the

2   service session is an Internet telephony application.

1   38.   The computer readable medium of claim 36, wherein the

2   service session is a multiple-user gaming application.

1   39.   The computer readable medium of claim 35, further

2   comprising instructions that when executed by the processor

3   perform the following functions:

4   periodically transmits during the service session

5   packet-based test messages addressed to the unique network

6   address of the assigned server;

7   determines that a connection with the assigned server

8   is disconnected if a packet-based message responding to the

9   test message is not received from the assigned server

10   within a predetermined period of time.

1   40.   The computer readable medium of claim 39, further

2   comprising instructions that when executed by the processor

3   perform the following function:

4   in response to determining that a connection with the

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5   assigned server is disconnected, transmits a packet-based

6   message comprising a request for a service session to the

7   remote service provider and addressed to the unique network

8   address associated with the service provider.